…that Iraq is experiencing an alarming wave of sectarian violence?

According to the UN, more than 2,500 people have been killed in Iraq in Sunni-Shi'a sectarian violence between April 2013 and July 9, 2013: about 550 people in April; more than 1,000 in May, making it the deadliest month in Iraq since the height of violence in 2006-07; an estimated 761 in June, and in the first days of July, about 190 people have been killed.

Political and social discontent with the Shi'a-led government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and sectarian divisions spilling over from the war in Syria, fuel the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian violence. Prime Minister al-Maliki has taken steps in the last two years to increase, rather than reduce, Sunni- Shi'a and ethnic Arab-Kurdish tensions, including defying a 2010 power-sharing agreement and taking legal actions against political rivals. For instance, the criminal conviction and death sentence of the highest level Sunni political leader in Iraq sparked widespread protests and violence from late 2012 through spring of 2013.

Sunni militants and extremist groups most frequently have targeted Shi'a civilians, including pilgrims and worshippers.   However, Sunni Muslims also have experienced sectarian violence, though to a lesser degree. Iraq's smallest religious minority communities, including Christians, Mandaeans, and Yezidis, lack militia or tribal structures to protect themselves and also have been vulnerable to attacks. In past years, large percentages of these communities fled the country.

   USCIRF has recommended since 2008 that the State Department designate Iraq as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, because the Iraqi government has proven unable to stop religiously-motivated attacks from occurring and lacks the will or capacity to investigate attacks and bring perpetrators to justice. For more information, see USCIRF's 2013 annual report chapter on Iraq, available here: http://www.uscirf.gov/images/Iraq%202013.pdf